

"How Do We Speak of God Without Religion?"

The Secular City, by Harvey Cox. Macmillan (paper). \$1.45.

by Bernard Murchland

It is difficult to speak of God when he is presumed dead. But Harvey Cox makes a noteworthy attempt. He by no means succeeds in extricating himself from the numerous difficulties involved; nonetheless, he has written a valuable book. It is not highly original or exceptionally profound; but it is relevant and encompassing. And if it is not always convincing it is consistently stimulating. In these days of theological unheaven *The Secular City* is something to be grateful for. It indicates, among other things, that a spark of the ancient fire still smolders.

In general terms the book tries to answer the problem raised by Dietrich Bonhoeffer who wrote from a Nazi prison camp in 1944: "How do we speak of God without religion? How do we speak in a secular fashion of God?" There can be no doubt, Cox argues with crepitating insistence, that we must indeed speak of Him in a secular fashion. The religion of Western Christendom, with its reliance on mythical and metaphysical categories, is gone forever. The old transcendent structure has collapsed. Secularization is defined as "the liberation of man from religious and metaphysical tutelage, the turning of his attention away from other worlds and towards this one. . . . The world has become man's task and man's responsibility."

That secularization is a fact, and has been for some time, few will dispute. The great energies of our time, and indeed much of the moral force of the Gospels

Father Bernard Murchland has written widely on questions which have related religion to the social and political order.

themselves, have been harnessed to secular structures and enterprises. The ideals and values of the secular world are vibrant and appealing; those of the Church world, in the minds of many, are by comparison pale and musty.

But secularization is not only a fact; it is a desirable fact; furthermore, Cox argues, secularization "represents an authentic consequence of biblical faith." Creation marks a new state of religious awareness; it signals a departure from the enchantment of magic and animism. The Genesis narratives distinguish between the orders of God, man and nature. Adam becomes co-responsible with God for the created order. Man has been given a mandate to assume responsibility for his world.

Cox finds further justification for secularization by examining the biblical accounts of the Exodus and Mount Sinai. Exodus "became the central event around which the Hebrews organized their whole perception of reality. As such, it symbolized the deliverance of man out of a sacral-political order and into history and social change, out of religiously legitimated monarchs and into a world where political leadership would be based on power gained by the capacity to accomplish specific social objectives." Politics is thus, at least in a preliminary manner, desacralized. Sinai, in a similar way, also promoted secularization because it represents the strongest biblical stand against idolatry and thus implies the "relativization of all human values."

Cox is aware that relativity is still a nasty word for many and fills them with insecurity. But the logic of his position demands that there be nothing timeless or inflexible about ethical values. In his own words: "Secularization places the responsibility for the forging of human values, like the

fashioning of political systems, in man's own hands. And this demands a maturity neither the nihilist nor the anarchist wishes to assume."

Against this scriptural backdrop, Cox elaborates his analysis of the secular city and investigates the possibilities of Christian growth within it. Society today is characterized by anonymity and mobility; its style is at once pragmatic and profane (as illustrated by John F. Kennedy and Albert Camus, respectively). Not a few well intentioned moralists have bemoaned the plight of man in such a society: his facelessness, his depersonalization, his alienation. But Cox thinks this has been a misdirected effort. It represents a failure to confront the world as it is. Existentialists, for example, suffer from an intellectual hangover. They pine for days that are no more and are too busy diagnosing the landscape of our pain to see the possibility of healing forces about us. Cox reverses the whole argument. Anonymity provides secular, urban man with a new challenge to maturation; it releases him from captivity to convention and tradition and affords him a wider margin of freedom for moral choice. Theologically, anonymity frees us from the Law and enables us to make a deeper appropriation of the Gospel. "Urban man's deliverance from enforced conventions," argues Cox, "makes it necessary to choose for himself. His being anonymous to most people permits him to have a face and a name for others."

Likewise with mobility. It too must be viewed in a positive light. The man in the cloverleaf, the commuter, the salesman are examples of our high social mobility, latter-day versions of the wandering hero. Such mobility need not impoverish; it need not be a cause of uprootedness or be

synonymous with a disintegration of values. It is an archetypal theme in literature from Homer to Jack Kerouac. Indeed it has sound theological precedent. The Hebrews were an essentially nomadic people and their God, unlike the pagan Baalim, was not a static, placed God. He moved about with his people. Nor did the Christ have where to lay his head. The Christian, in a rich definition is a pilgrim, *homo viator*.

Cox is aware that there is a destructive kind of mobility. But by and large, he concludes, "the mobile man is less tempted than the immobile man to demote Yahweh into a baal. He will usually not idolatry any town or nation. He will not be as likely to see the present economic and political structure as the unambiguous expression of how things always have been and always should be. He will be more open to change, movement, newness."

There is something plausible about this line of argument. It is particularly good to hear a theological voice in a constructive register, endeavoring to make some sense out of our present situations and dilemmas. But there is something puzzling about it as well. I should say Cox's analysis is accurate enough. But it is too glib, too uncritical. For one thing he rather too readily overlooks the alienating effects of the secular city, its great power to victimize. The advent of the alienated man, C. W. Mills has pointed out, "and all the themes which lie behind his advent now affect the whole of our serious intellectual life and cause our immediate intellectual malaise. I know of no idea, no theme, no problem that ... is so much involved in the possible default of contemporary social science."

Cox conveniently ignores a powerful body of sociological criticism (since Marx) as well as a significant psychological critique that has been building since the time of Freud. In my opinion his case simply cannot stand until

it comes to terms with such criticism. And how would he cope with the testimony of modern literature and art? There is no way around the negativity engendered by the secular city. There may be a way through it; but Cox does not elect this route.

One can, of course, make theological sense of some kind out of any given predicament. Thus Cox manages rather well in blessing his secular city and all its works with appropriate biblical texts. But he does so at the cost of suppressing equally relevant biblical data. The same Genesis narrative that establishes man's responsibility for the created order also speaks of his fall, of man's perennial tendency to slip away from the desirable ideal. Just as Cox largely ignores the alienation in society, so too he fails to take sufficiently into account its theological cognate which usually goes by the name of sin. Pragmatism has not yet proven itself capable of dealing with either form of negativity in any convincing way.

Perhaps, at bottom, this is a failure of methodology. Cox looks first to the situation, to what is going on, and then follows with a theological justification. The problem here is that there is no guarantee that what is there calls for such justification. This is a fallacy of functionalism that has in recent history led us up all sorts of blind alleys. Hitler's wars, for example. Such a method lacks an adequate critical principle. What men as a matter of fact do certainly has some bearing on the ethical question of what they ought to do. But it is not the whole picture. The facts of human life are after all functions of our ideals and not vice versa.

Thus, when Cox argues that "the grammar of the Gospel is not a categorical imperative; it first of all points to what is occurring, only secondarily does it call for a consequent change in attitude and action" he is surely wrong. The Gospel is full of imperatives of one sort or another. Command-

ments are laid down; attitudes are inculcated; perfection is demanded. In particular the evangelical ideals of love and justice are recommended as possible states, before any corresponding embodiment of these ideals is expected contextually. The point of the Gospel is not so much to put man on his own, as Cox would have it; rather its dynamism derives from its manner of situating man within a larger, and indeed transcendent, context of creativity. Only in this way can we make any sense out of grace and such transforming virtues as suffering and patience, traditional categories Cox pays far too little heed to. In fact, only in this way can we fully justify the maturation and responsibility he repeatedly urges.

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A similar problem arises with Cox's identification of the kingdom of God, with the secular city. The question is not self-validating. There is a kind of reductionism here that lacks a purifying criterion. It is true, of course, as it is desirable, that we can dispense with Augustinian dualism. A long standing and very pernicious kind of supernaturalism is rightly exorcised. And Cox is astutely theological when he writes: "The Kingdom of God, concentrated in the life of Jesus of Nazareth, remains the fullest possible disclosure of the partnership of God and man in history. Our struggle for the shaping of the secular city represents the way we respond faithfully to this reality in our own times." Nonetheless there is an element of question begging here. Just what kind of city we ought to be shaping remains unclear. To say, as Cox does, that the secular city is an historical process which removes adolescent illusions is simply naive. Our age is as beleaguered by illusion and superstition as any other. And Cox's own remarks in his chapter on sex (an excellent one it is too) and

elsewhere in the book indicates that he himself is aware of this.

Reinhold Niebuhr once noted that the orthodox churches are inclined to petrify the Christian message with the insights and attitudes of a past age. The liberal religions, on the other hand, tend to compromise too readily with the passing prejudices of a particular culture. "The failure of liberal Christianity," Niebuhr says, "is derived from its inclination to invest the relative moral standards of a commercial age with ultimate sanctity by falsely casting the aura of the absolute and transcendent ethic of Jesus upon them. A religion which capitulates to the prejudices of a contemporary age is not very superior to a religion which remains enslaved to the partial and relative insights of an age already dead." This seems an indisputably valid criticism. And I fear that, to some extent at least, Professor Cox is guilty of it. He strains too hard, if not at a gnat, at least at a society that in itself is transitory. The concept of the secular city can bear only so much theological freight.

I found the best part of the book to be the author's discussion of the Church as God's avant-garde, as a people whose collective activities should lead them to a participation in God's action in the world. He sees the Church's role as fourfold. *First*, its kerygmatic function, the broadcasting of its message. This message is, as Cox sees it, the defeat of "principalities and powers"—which in secular terms indicates the various cultural forces which militate against human freedom. In reference to an earlier criticism, let me note that the author does not seem sufficiently cognizant that the secular city itself may be such a force.

Secondly, there is the Church's diakonic function, its effort to impart wholeness and health. In political terms, it means a radical confrontation of our grievous social ailments, with obvious shades

of the earlier Social Gospel movement.

Thirdly, the Church exercises a koinoniac role. It proclaims the signs of the Kingdom to the world, "harbingers of a reality which is breaking into history not from the past but from the future."

Finally, the Church functions as a cultural exorcist, freeing men from the "narcotic vagaries through which they wrongly perceive the social reality around them, and from habitual forms of action or inaction stemming from these illusions."

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The issue of God is left somewhat unresolved. Cox thinks by and large that we ought to speak of him in a political manner, for politics is "the sphere of human mastery and responsibility," "the living lexicon of the urban-secular man." Here again, his inveterate reductionism intrudes. Politics will in this new age do what metaphysics once did. Theologically, about all we can say of God is that he is hidden. We meet him "at those places in life where we come up against that which is not pliable and disposable, at those hard edges where we are both stopped and challenged to move ahead. God meets us as the transcendent, at those aspects of our experience which can never be transmuted into extensions of ourselves. He meets us in the wholly other." I fear to think what a linguistic analyst might do with a passage like that! It may be too that we shall have to get rid of the word *God* and rename him. The new name will be determined by our historical conditions and meanings; it will be a function of our new experiences of freedom. Meanwhile, Cox suggests perhaps not without a touch of irony, it might be well to take a moratorium on speech until the new name emerges.

I have entered some strong reservations about *The Secular City*. But I should like to conclude in

a more positive tone. The book, to my mind, is an excellent prolegomenon to what has been called a theology of terrestrial values, with the emphasis on social ethics. Perhaps it would have been a better book if it were more person, rather than event, centered. But no matter. If Cox's sociological analyses are sometimes skimpy and if his theological prehension is frequently adumbrative, he has nonetheless performed one remarkable service: he has in a very comprehensive way directed theological discourse to the arena of social action and historical process where the Spirit is at work. It has been too long absent from that domain.

A whole theological reconstruction is necessary in our day (as the Vatican Council, among other evidences, has made clear) and much of what Cox says can aid us in that arduous task. He has grasped an important dimension of theological investigation and has described for us in some detail the kind of world that theology must come to terms with. Whether or not his own theology does so is another question.

The philosophical disciplines have preceded theology in this work. Most of the major schools of the past century have attempted a critique of our theories about the world (including the world of God) in terms of the world directly encountered. And the world directly encountered, as John Randall has said, "is found to be fundamentally temporal in character, to be specific and plural, a many rather than a neat one, to be capable of inquiry and manipulation in detail, to be subject to experimental reconstruction and to be fundamentally functional in character, an affair of many specific means-ends relations." Perhaps American naturalism, more than any other school, has contributed to this vision. Harvey Cox is firmly within that naturalistic tradition and the consequences for theology could be very significant.

Vietnam and the United States

Hans J. Morgenthau. Public Affairs Press (paper). 112 pp. \$2.00.
 "I am indeed convinced that the use we have been making of our power in Vietnam for more than a decade has been im-
 provident and foolish, and it has been so to an ever increasing
 degree," writes Dr. Morgenthau in his preface to this collection
 of articles about Vietnam written during the same period. The
 detailed chronology of events through June 16, 1965, which the
 author has provided, is a very useful one.

The Opinion Makers

William L. Rivers. Beacon. 207 pp. \$4.95.
 Mr. Rivers, a former Congressional assistant and correspondent
 in Washington for *The Reporter*, names names and cites case
 histories in his description of the personalities and practices
 which determine the shape and content of political journalism
 in the U.S. today.

Military Concepts and Philosophy

Henry E. Eccles. Rutgers. 339 pp. \$9.00.
 "My central thesis," says the author, "is that military planning,
 education, and discussion are handicapped by the lack of a

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comprehensive theory of modern conflict." With a view to laying
 the foundations for one, Admiral Eccles has attempted to clarify
 "a group of interrelated concepts" among which he numbers
 conflict, strategy, logistics, tactics, command decision, command
 organization, morale and leadership.

A Reader's Guide to the Great Religions

Charles J. Adams, ed. Free Press. 364 pp. \$6.95.
 The religious traditions dealt with here include the "primitive
 religions," Japanese religions, the religions of China, Buddhism,
 Hinduism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Each of the essays
 was written by a specialist whose task it was to provide "a criti-
 cal selection and evaluation of the literature"—largely in Eng-
 lish—about that tradition.

Personalities and Policies

D. C. Watt. Notre Dame. 276 pp. \$6.00
 What is the nature of the British foreign-policy making elite?
 The author has sought to identify this group in the first half of
 the century, and then to illustrate its influence upon specific
 policies and upon Britain's relationship with the U.S. and other
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 primary sources follows the essays.

worldview

volume 8, no. 10 / October 1965

WORLDVIEW is published monthly (except for a combined July-
 August issue) by the Council on Religion and International Affairs
 Subscription: \$4.00 per year.
 Address: 170 East 64th Street, New York, New York 10021

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